

AFRICA

Trump 2.0 Africa

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Donald Trump's victory has inevitably prompted a general reflection on how his administration will affect American foreign policy and global dynamics. Most of the discussion are focusing on the possible scenarios in the two active conflicts, Ukraine and the Middle East. However, there is no lack of thoughts on other regional contexts. Africa is one of them. How will the Trump 2.0 policy affect the relationship between the US and African countries? How will the US address some of Africa's most important issues, such as climate change, terrorism, development, and global competition, and how will this shape the continent's internal dynamics? These and many other questions will remain unanswered in the months following the expected move into the White House in January. These and many other questions remain unanswered. They are likely to remain so for many months after his return to the White House. Indeed, it will take time to assess Trump 2.0's policy actions in Africa. Predicting the policy agenda of a new administration is always complex. This difficulty is even more pronounced where clear political guidelines are lacking, and the idiosyncratic variable weighs more than it does in other administrations. Donald Trump's personality and beliefs do not guarantee that his administration actions will follow the decisions he made during his first term. On the contrary, it may be precisely the experience of the 2017-2021 period that will lead him to different attitudes and visions. Having said that, it is also possible to outline some of the possible trends in the African policy of the new Trump administration.

The first thing to note is that Trump will not prioritize Africa. As was the case during his first term, a constant even during the Biden presidency, US policy will continue to pivot towards Asia. For more than a decade, the US has been in the difficult position of finding a new balance between resources and international engagement. In this context, US relations with African states have had to evolve through multiple solutions, some of which are alternative and some complementary. The Biden administration chose to focus on African agency and the

development of a flexible regional architecture, comprising a network of multilateral relationships involving African state and non-state actors. The US approach under the Biden administration also sought greater coordination with non-regional partners such as the EU and European states. Specifically, the Biden administration sought to revitalize Africa policy through a mix of bottom-up engagement with African societies and indirect military support to African states to address key challenges such as transnational terrorism. The new presidency is likely to decide to do things differently. The four pillars of Biden's Africa policy - a. promoting openness and open societies, b. delivering democratic and security dividends, c. promoting pandemic recovery and economic opportunity, d. environmental protection, climate adaptation and a just energy transition - will be replaced by a policy based on security, stability and prosperity. This shift is largely due to the different ways in which the two presidents view international politics. Behind Trump's "America First" rhetoric lies a more realist approach to global politics than Biden's. If the incoming Trump administration has its way, there will be no crusade to promote democracy and liberal principles. In some ways, it will be reminiscent of what happened during the Obama presidency. After eight years of international hyper activism driven by a desire to export liberal democracy, President Obama decided to dramatically reduce American involvement in international affairs. But whereas Obama accompanied this withdrawal with a revival of multilateralism, Trump is likely to insist on bilateralism, delegation to partner countries and direct leader diplomacy. Indeed, compared to President Obama, Trump has less regard for commitments to some of its historical allies, such as NATO members. As a result, the Trump 2.0 US is unlikely to adopt a regulatory approach based on the spread of democratic institutions. Instead, it will opt for pragmatic relationships driven by strategic considerations.

The likely change in US policy will further weaken some of the continent's most important institutions, most notably the African Union. However, the policy choices of the Trump administration should not be seen as the cause of the crisis of multilateralism, but rather as a manifestation of it. Bilateralism has come to dominate multilateralism in international politics. Multilateralism, as conceived and shaped by the liberal international order, has proved inadequate to deal effectively with the many challenges that have emerged in Africa and on the global stage over the past fifteen years. In the African context, alternative solutions such

as bilateral agreements, ad hoc coalitions and the intervention of regional bodies have long since emerged, especially on the issue of security and peace. Therefore, Washington is likely to decide to reconfigure its approach to Africa by consolidating relations with some countries considered key to its strategic interests and anchored in their regional contexts, such as Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa and Egypt. To this end, the Trump administration will qualitatively change the nature of aid engagement, as it did in its first term. Traditional development assistance will be phased out. The Trump presidency will prioritize direct investment. This was the choice made during his first term. It led to an increase in exchanges and private sector involvement. On the other hand, a possible continuation of this policy under Trump 2.0 would reduce development aid and consequently revise many projects initiated over the past four years. This approach is not only driven by Trump's entrepreneurial attitude. It reflects an increasingly widespread belief in many American and Western circles that reducing aid can break Africa's dependency.

From a geostrategic point of view, Africa will once again be perceived by the Trump administration as a stage for global competition. However, in the context of increasing competition at the global level, Africa is not the most important arena. In all likelihood, Trump's strategic foreign policy priorities will be, in order, East Asia, the Arctic, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East and then Africa. In Africa, the focus will be on trying to gradually catch up with Chinese dominance and containing Russian expansionism. The Trump administration is likely to seek to forge and maintain alliances with regional and extra-regional actors. As it did during its first four-year term, the Trump administration will delegate security and even political issues to other actors. Security delegation will lead to the establishment of relationships based on transactional exchanges and temporary strategic convergences rather than shared visions and values. Among the most active actors with whom the US could develop fruitful security and political relationships are the UAE, KSA, Rwanda, Turkey, Egypt, Kenya and South Africa. In some cases, Washington may choose to delegate the management of specific crises and conflict situations to one of these actors. However, doubts remain as to how the US administration will navigate regional rivalries, such as the growing strain between two of its allies, the UAE and the KSA.

Finally, there is the possibility that the Trump administration will make a clean break with the past on certain issues. One is the possible recognition of Somaliland. Given its geographical location on the Gulf of Aden, it is considered highly strategic. The Houthi threat to international trade routes and growing mistrust of China have prompted the US to consider moving its military presence from Djibouti to the Somaliland coast. For some time now, Washington has been watching the internal affairs of the de facto state with interest, regardless of the political administrations in the White House. The peaceful transition of power following the November elections demonstrated the functioning of democratic procedures in Somaliland. This dynamism is appreciated in Washington, as demonstrated by the visit of the US ambassador (Richard Riley) to Hargeisa. Recognition of Somaliland's de jure independence has many supporters in the United States, particularly but not only within the ranks of the Republican Party. Even in the Pentagon, there is growing pressure to at least consider establishing an American presence in Somaliland. Behind these assessments are the difficulties in Somalia, the interest in moving away from the Chinese military base in Djibouti, and a possible strategic convergence with Israel. Therefore, it cannot be ruled out that the Trump 2.0 administration will move in this direction. However, the new administration will have to overcome the skepticism of the DoS. The DoS is concerned about the potential impact on Somalia. A decisive American move to recognize Somaliland independence would further weaken the Somali state-building process. Moreover, the DoS is aware that recognizing Somaliland would further destabilize the African Union and reopen several unresolved issues thorough the continent.

While Trump's unconventional approach and demeanor may cause confusion and anxiety, it may not be entirely negative for US-Africa relations. Apart from a few adjustments, the American agenda towards Africa has been ineffective for many years. The US lags far behind China across the continent. To catch up, it will have to completely revamp its appeal. So, a clean break with the past and a revolutionary approach could shake things up. Washington urgently needs to rethink its approach to Africa and its relationship with African states. Reducing the rhetorical appeal to liberal values in the name of greater honesty and pragmatism could be a winning choice at a particular moment in history. African elites value a direct and pragmatic interlocutor like President Trump. The ability to revive America's image and influence at low political and economic cost is the great challenge facing the Trump 2.0

administration.

To conclude, Africa policy is one of the many unknowns of the transition from the Biden administration to Trump 2.0. Here, as in other contexts, it is difficult to make predictions, but it is also important not to take anything for granted.

**image credit: Brookings Institution*

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